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## MRA Mission

*The Minnesota Reading Association actively promotes lifelong literacy for all citizens. We encourage professional interaction among all organizations involved with literacy and provide resources for exemplary literacy practices and habits.*

## Uncomfortable Moments

### Presidents Column

As I returned from the recent IRA Convention in Chicago, I had time to reflect on what I learned. Of course, reflection is generally an important part of growth and should be a regular part of our days as teachers, but it is also crucial in those moments after educational or transformative experiences like a good conference.

On this occasion, the words of Dr. Steve Perry were the ones that got stuck in my head. Perry gave the keynote address to start the convention, and he certainly gave the audience some valuable food for thought.

Perry, who is known by day as the founder and acting director of a magnet school in Hartford, Connecticut, has authored two books and is a regular commentator on issues of education for CNN.



At the heart of his address, Perry talked about the inequities that exist within our society, pointing out that in the city of Memphis—a city he had recently visited, one in every three adults is functionally illiterate. He posed the question, “Are we prepared to accept that in some communities some people are just born less capable?” He went on to say that some teachers have grown complacent because they have grown to assume that either the societal pressures as a whole, or the lack of family support in particular, are too much to overcome within the confines of the school day. He states, “Every single one of us knows who the bad teachers are in every single building . . . and on the day that you turn your back and act like you don’t see it, you become a co-conspirator. . . on the day that you sit in the teacher’s lounge and you listen to those teachers talk about those children, you are contributing to a caustic environment that will not produce the fruit that we need.”

It was a pretty strong message, one that troubled me and gave me much food for thought. And while I do not completely agree with Dr. Perry and his belief that picking out “bad” teachers would be that easy or, assuming we could, that we (as teachers) would be able to do much in the way of removing those teachers from our buildings, I do agree that we might lack that sense of urgency that seems to underscore his message. Losing that urgency happens gradually over the course of time. Some of us grow comfortable with certain ways of doing things, or perhaps we don’t take the effort to carefully examine or reflect on whether something is as effective as it could be or perhaps worthy of doing at all. And, to protect ourselves from feelings of inadequacy or failure, we write off our own shortcomings and blame the breakdown on others. Recognizing this complacency in ourselves is disquieting. And it should be.



Scott Voss, President

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# Reading Councils

## Arrowhead Reading Council

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### Catching Up

What a great year it has been for Arrowhead Reading Council. We are growing and moving in a positive direction.

We started the year with a Daily Five presentation and we ended the year with a Daily Five presentation. In no way can everything be covered in the short amount of time of an afterschool presentation, but it gives members a great starting place. It also allows members to share what works and where they can go for more information.

Duluth, for its size, has a remarkable number of talented authors. Arrowhead took advantage of this and had many of our local authors do presentations for us.

One of the highlights was having Newbery-winning author Jacqueline Kelly visit Duluth.

Kelly's visit was part of Duluth's One Book, One Community read. She visited two of the middle schools to discuss her novel, *The Evolution of Calpurnia Tate*. The students shared their individual connections to the book by bringing in items, writing epilogues, and serving a potluck with foods featured in the book. This historical fiction novel received the 2010 Newbery Honor Award, North Carolina Young Adult Book Award, along with several other honors. UWS Professors and one of the classes at UWS



Jacqueline Kelly

read the book and did Literature discussions so they were excited to be able to hear her in person.

One of the highlights was having authors Linda Glaser and Margi Preus attend her presentation. Also in attendance were Steve and Vicki Palmquist of Children's Literature Network. What an evening.

We look forward to new members coming on board, planning events that meet the needs of our membership and the continued growth of Arrowhead.

## Southeast Minnesota Reading Council

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### 3rd Annual Super Summer Celebration!

JUNE 5, 2011, Thursday, 4:30 to 6:00 pm

Godfather's Pizza

1611 16th St NW, Rochester, MN 55901  
507.288.7515

Join us for:

- Information about SELCO's "Camp Read-a-Lot" program
- Book talks on the BEST of the BEST children's, young adult, and professional books (feel free to bring your own top picks to share!)
- \$1.00 Book Sale
- Websites and resources from the International Reading Association annual convention

Pizza and soda will be served! Lots of cool door prizes!

Please email your RSVP to Michele at [mipretzer@rochester.k12.mn.us](mailto:mipretzer@rochester.k12.mn.us).

Submit event details to Jen McCarty Plucker by August 15, 2012, in order to have your information included in the upcoming issue of our *Highlights* newsletter. [j.plucker@mnreading.org](mailto:j.plucker@mnreading.org)

## IRA Convention

### Emotions of a First-Time Attendee

Anxious. Excited. Amazed. Awed. Inspired. Overwhelmed. Validated. Revitalized. Fortunate.

These are just a few of the many emotions I felt as a first-time IRA Convention attendee. First, I was anxious. I was leaving my classroom for 3½ days, not an easy undertaking to get ready for. I was also leaving my own children for longer than I ever have. However, at the same time, I was excited. I knew I would learn so much to bring back to the classroom and I was going to be with a group of people who shared the same passion for reading.

When we arrived in Chicago, I was amazed. Amazed at the excitement of the city, at the smoothness of how everything was organized, and with the fantastic group that embraced me and let me join in with their activities (thank you, Albert Lea teachers!).

I was awed to be in the presence of such wonderful literacy professionals with whom I was going to spend the next four days learning and sharing: Richard Allington, Donald Bear, Mary Bigler, Ron Clark, Sharon Taberski, Stephanie Harvey, and so many more.

I was awed by the fact that I got to talk to and listen to and have my picture taken with Mem Fox!

I was inspired by the keynote speakers, the stories shared of important teachers and learning experiences, the heartfelt stories of students that we've had.

I was overwhelmed. The exhibit hall is huge and I'm a hoarder so I knew I had to be careful. I was also overwhelmed because I did not follow the advice to pack a large suitcase and bring an extra. I was determined I could fit it all in my carry-on and be just fine. Next time, I'll listen!

I was validated. I'm not completely off base, I am doing what I should be doing but now I also have the insights to do more and push the status quo to do the best for my students and school.

I am revitalized. This was a life changing experience both professionally and personally. I am ready to finish out the school year with new energy and ideas. I am ready to read and plan and prepare over the summer. I am ready to participate in conversations about change in education.

I am fortunate to have the support of my school district and the encouragement of my incredible friend, Maurina, to have attended the IRA convention in Chicago. It was an emotion-filled adventure!

Jill Magnuson, Dover-Eyota Schools



Twelve educators from Albert Lea Schools traveled to Chicago to attend IRA in 2012.

## Poetry Pizazz

The second graders in my class spent months reading and writing poetry preparing for April and National Poetry month. Throughout the year we have integrated poetry into Morning Meeting, math, science, and social studies and dabbled in writing a variety of types of poems.



As April approached, we began making "Poetry Pizzazz Pockets." These folders contained multiple poems that we practiced

as a class before bringing them home. The object was to read the poems as many times as possible to as many people as possible and collect signatures along the way. We were practicing fluency, accuracy, tone and style and having fun!

During our monthly trip to the assisted living center in town, students even brought their folders and collected signatures as we read to the residents!

As the weeks progressed, we added more poems including ones that students wrote. The students thought "it was fun having something short and special to read to others"! We plan to continue our folders through the end of the school year.

The students wrote the following poem together:

*Pockets of pizzazzy poems  
Oh, I love to read you  
Everyday to everyone  
Time and time again  
Reading and writing poems  
Yeah! Poetry is fun!*

Jill Magnuson, Dover-Eyota Schools



## It's Not Too Late

### Reading Intervention for Secondary Students

For many middle- and high-school students, a reading intervention class is not a welcome course listed on a daily schedule. These students' perceptions of themselves as readers and writers are usually ones of failure and frustration.

The curriculum of the strategic reading and academic literacy courses in the Rosemount-Apple Valley-Eagan schools are based on the research of the best in the field of adolescent literacy including the recommendations in the Model Plan for Adolescent Reading Development and Intervention put forth by the Minnesota Department of Education and the Secondary Reading Interest Council.

Students are targeted for strategic reading courses based on analysis of their literacy histories. Students who are not at grade-level proficiency and not receiving other reading support are provided instruction by a licensed reading teacher in an elective course. This allows the student to continue to receive their English and Language Arts standards in their core classes but also get the additional literacy intervention they need to propel them toward college and career readiness.

### Motivation and Identity

In the first several weeks, the primary goal is to build a community of readers, writers, and scholars—to create conditions where students can recognize their strengths and see themselves as successful students. Many are unable when they walk into our classes, to tell us a book they've finished in the past year (or several years). So, we flood our rooms with high-interest, young adult materials written at a level students can confidently read. Many of the teachers of striving readers have also

written grants to be able to provide an environment with comfortable chairs, pillows, and reading spaces that appeal to teens.

### *Testimonies from our striving readers show the value of a flood of books and a comfortable place to read:*

- "The presence of books helped me discover the types of books I like to read."

—Michael

- "C234 (Eastview High School's Reading Room) has a calmer feeling to it than other classrooms."

—Thomas

- "It is easier to learn when you are comfortable."

—Derek

### Time to Read and Write

The research is clear: our students are not spending enough time reading each day. In fact, according to the National Endowment for the Arts, 2007, "Less than one third of 13-year-olds are daily readers, a 14% decline from 20 years earlier."

The research is also clear regarding the importance of reading—students who read the most each day score the highest on standardized exams—especially



the types that will determine our students' futures. Guthrie (2006) states, "Remarkably, reading engagement is more important than students' family background consisting of parents' education and income." Guthrie synthesizes several studies that show reading engagement trumps socioeconomic status as a correlate of reading achievement. Rather than assign reading, we hold sacred 20-30 minutes of reading time daily in our classes.

- "I like how we have TIME to read quietly and RELAX."

—Mariah

- "I am so busy at night that I rarely have time to read. Academic Literacy 9 gives me time to read every day and I enjoy that."

—Shannon

### Explicit Comprehension Strategy Instruction:

We explicitly teach comprehension strategies through mini-lessons, guided reading, and one-on-one instruction. Students learn that "Reading Is Thinking" and that the thinking must be visible in order to construct meaning from texts. We help our students to read strategically and see comprehending as a verb ... an action they must take every time their eyes meet text.

### Just Right Challenge and Gradual Release of Responsibility:

As we work with students, we take the approach video game makers have mastered. When students are engaged in mastering a level in their favorite video game, they may feel frustration. Yet most don't give up. Most barrel through, committing time, energy, and effort to the task. Once they master the level, they feel

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## It's Not Too Late (cont'd)

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euphoria. This euphoria is what we want our students to feel as they accomplish tasks at high levels.

As students are mastering a level in their favorite video game, they don't necessarily want someone to swoop in and do the maneuvers for



them. They may want tips. They may even do some research online or ask questions of their fellow gamers to be able to master the learning and make it to the next level. In the same regard, instructors of our strategic readers understand the necessity to scaffold support for their students and help them embrace the frustration and see it as an important part of the journey to mastery. The strategic reading program is about empowering, not enabling; higher standards, not lower; accelerated learning, not slower paced; more time for literacy learning, not less.

- "I enjoy reading this year. It expands my knowledge. This class makes learning *super fun*."

—Santana

### Go Digital

We also embrace the digital literacy strengths many of our students bring to class and we incorporate

technology as a tool for teaching academic literacy. Students are engaged when they can create, publish, and use the technologies in which they are immersed outside of class. It is a way to bridge confidence to an area where students feel less confident. It also allows instructors an opportunity to embrace the 21st century student and prepare them for the 21st century global workforce.

### Focus on Learning

Finally, and most importantly, we monitor our students' progress regularly and individualize instruction as necessary. We challenge our students to become reflective learners in order for them to transfer the skills they learn in their strategic reading courses to other content area classes. The data we've collected as a district shows that students in strategic reading courses increase their literacy growth rate at least twice that of their on-grade level peers but can accelerate it as much as four times the rate of their peers.

- "In this class you don't have to be perfect and you get to enhance your reading skills."  
~Briana

### References:

- Guthrie, J. (2008). *Engaging Adolescents in Reading*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- Minnesota Department of Education and Secondary Reading Interest Council. (2010). *Updated Model Adolescent Plan for Reading Intervention and Development*.

Jennifer McCarty Plucker, Ed. D., MRA President-Elect, K-12 Intervention Specialist; Rosemount-Apple Valley-Eagan Schools

## President (cont'd)

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It is what inspires us to work harder, work smarter, and move forward.

And that is exactly why it is necessary to continually move beyond the walls of our classroom for professional growth. That's why it is okay to stand in discomfort on occasion, to be troubled by new thoughts and ideas. Those ideas and thoughts help us to correct our course or perhaps to confirm our beliefs and redouble our efforts.

The Minnesota Reading Association has made this the cornerstone of our organization. Over the course of the 2011-2012 year, we have sponsored or organized over 20 different events throughout the state of Minnesota. And we still have a few yet this year.

At the moment, our sights are set on our annual Summer Conference, and we hope to see you on August 9th at the University of Minnesota's, St. Paul Campus. Our theme this year is Transforming Readers and Writers. Like so many of our events, you will walk away with not only a wealth of new ideas and information, but the comfort and knowledge that there is a network of like-minded educators who are passionate about literacy.

Hope to see you there!

Scott Voss [s.voss@mnreading.org](mailto:s.voss@mnreading.org)

*Thank you!  
for being  
an MRA  
member.*



## My Trainer

In July of 2011, 15 minutes before being picked up to go to the airport, I was putting the last few items into a small suitcase that I intended to carry-on for my flight to London. My mom, sister, and I were taking a 10-day trip to England and France. Many hours of planning had preceded this moment, including several conversations about the appropriate shoe choices for a trip that would include miles of walking every day. (My mother knows me all too well—style always trumps comfort in my shoe collection.)

As I leaned over my bed and picked up the smallest suitcase I've ever packed for a trip, a sharp pain ripped through my lower back. I cried out words I cannot include in this article, dropped the suitcase, and leaned on my bed. For several minutes, I couldn't move because of the pain and the lack of strength to support myself. Finally, I was able to stand up and carefully get myself out the door and into the car to go to the airport. Needless to say, I checked my bag and spent the first half of the trip nursing my very sore back while walking around London and Paris in ugly, but sensible, sandals.

When I returned home, I decided it was ridiculous and embarrassing that a 34-year-old woman would pull a muscle in her back by picking up a lightweight suitcase. So, I joined a health club near my home, but knew I would need someone to hold me accountable for using it.

I forked over enough money to buy several nice pairs of shoes and signed up for a small group fitness class that meets three days a week for an hour each day and is led by a personal trainer.

For the first three weeks, it was okay. I was trying lots of different equipment and completing intervals



of cardio on the elliptical machines. I wondered daily if I was making any progress, but when I asked my trainer about tracking my progress with data, he said I would not see any noticeable improvement for 6 months.

Then, during week four, we had a "substitute" trainer, since our normal guy was on vacation. During the first workout with him, Paul walked around as we sweated our way through a series of exercises and he made several small suggestions to me to correct my form—lean back more, keep your elbows in, stand a little farther away from the machine. Then, he stood and watched me complete a few more reps to ensure I understood the corrections before he moved on. During our cardio workouts, he provided speed or incline settings to make sure we were pushing ourselves. That week, I got a lot of "thumbs up" from him, which did not mean "great job," but actually indicated I needed to increase my speed, incline, or weights in order to work harder.

I needed that. And I appreciated that he was paying attention to me as an individual and pushing me when I needed to be pushed. Starting with week five, I switched to Paul's class. The class meeting time was not as convenient, but the benefits of working with him far outweigh the drawbacks of being at the gym at 7 p.m.

Since I have spent my entire adult life avoiding any kind of physical activity, I've reflected a lot about why I'm so motivated to exercise now (sometimes I even go to the club on "off days" and work out by myself!). Here's what I've concluded:

- My trainer cares about me as an individual; he knows my goals and can tell the minute I'm not working toward them with my best effort (see: "thumbs up")
- My trainer provides me with personalized feedback at every session; the changes he suggests are small and manageable enough, so I never feel overwhelmed
- My trainer makes sure I can complete the task properly before he leaves my side
- My trainer collects data on my progress: he weighs, measures, and pinches me—it's not as bad as it sounds
- My trainer has a plan and sets goals: exercises are selected prior to our arrival and we are provided with a printout of the cardio workout, so we know what's coming next
- My trainer never asks me to do something that will result in a feeling of failure: I'm always able to run for the required length of time and lift the required amount of weight
- My trainer takes an interest in who I am outside of the health club and shares things about himself—he wears women's socks, by the way.

Take the word "trainer" and replace it with "teacher." Now, we're onto something...

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Jessica Crooker, Vice President, Minnesota Reading Association  
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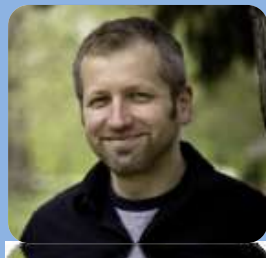
**August 9, 2012**

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Come hear keynote speakers Chris Crutcher and Ralph Fletcher.



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or, mail in the registration form along with payment.

Questions may be directed to:

Jennifer McCarty Plucker ([j.plucker@mnreading.org](mailto:j.plucker@mnreading.org))

Jessica Crooker ([j.crooker@mnreading.org](mailto:j.crooker@mnreading.org))

## Sharing Books, Building a Community

When Todd Bol held a garage sale at his home in Hudson, Wisconsin, a few years ago, he didn't expect shoppers to focus instead on the small library he had installed in his front yard. Resembling a one-room schoolhouse in memory of his mother, a schoolteacher, the library was filled with books for members of the community to borrow at their leisure. The novelty of Bol's idea sold better than anything else at his garage sale, which prompted him to pass on the idea to his friend, Rick Brooks, who suggested building a few libraries in the Madison area. The Little Free Library was born.

Two years later, there are now well over 500 of them in 33 states and 17 countries, including France, Germany, and Ghana. While it's hard to pinpoint an exact number of libraries at their current rate of exponential growth, Bol is confident that 1,000 Little Free Libraries will be standing by summer.

"When I see people come up to the library, they pitch their voice high like a puppy just walked in the room," said Bol, who has consistently witnessed reactions like this since that day at his garage sale.

But the aesthetic value of what looks like a birdhouse filled with books isn't the only thing that appeals to those who want to get involved.

"People are as attracted to the sense of community that these libraries promote as they are attracted to sharing books and the really cute structures they're put in," said Brooks.

Bol predicts that by April of this year there will be 70 Little Libraries in the Twin Cities alone, a bump from the current 30 that have popped up in the area since last September. Places like the Soo Visual Arts Center in downtown Minneapolis and Macalester College have already done

their part by sponsoring Little Free Libraries in the community.



Brooks says that building the libraries is becoming a popular activity among student groups at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. The Odyssey Project, which encourages adults facing economic struggle to pursue higher education, sponsors a library at a bus stop near the UW-Madison campus. A French professor at Madison, along with the French conversation group he leads, has purchased a Library and plans to decorate it with scenes from different French eras, as well as fill it with books in French and about France.

"They're a popular project for student groups," said Brooks, "because it's an excellent way to promote reading among children and literacy for adults. It's an easy, relatively small project that can benefit many people for a long time."

But the best part about stewarding a Little Free Library is personalizing it. The organization's website offers instructions and tips for those who wish to build their own, leaving them free to decorate and fill their library with whatever books they please.

Bol believes nearly 75 percent of people build their own, but kits and pre-made libraries are also available on the website for purchase by

those who aren't tool savvy. These libraries come in a variety of styles: some for indoors, some for outdoors, some made from recycled barn wood. Because book companies frequently donate books to Little Free Library, a few library styles even come with books already inside them. These libraries can also be customized and decorated, because, as Bol says, "This is an extension of their heart and their soul and who they are."

Contrary to what one might think, the public presence of these special structures rarely incurs vandalism. Indie Coffee, also near UW-Madison, is the most popular Little Free Library location, according to Brooks. Within a year and a half, Indie's library has cycled through more than 2,000 books. Having the front door ripped off its hinges in that time was the only injury the library has sustained. "We've had almost a million people who had been by that library, and we've gone through thousands of books. That's not a bad record!" said Brooks, who also says that theft isn't very common among the libraries, because it's hard to steal a book that's free in the first place.

As it continues to gain popularity, is the Little Free Library just one more thing to add to the list of threats against the stability of traditional libraries?

No. In fact, the Little Free Library has been more helpful to brick-and-mortar libraries than anything. Because so many books that are donated to the organization can't be used, they end up being donated to local libraries. Almost 1,000 books were donated to a local library in Madison, according to Brooks.

Even individual Little Libraries have more books they can handle, but it's not uncommon for them to run



## All Means All

Spring has sprung! Things are blooming, birds are singing, and it's a great time to take a deep breath and enjoy the fresh air.

It's also a great opportunity take another look at what we have accomplished this school year, and use that knowledge to plan for next year. How are we doing? Are all kids reading well? Do we have rigorous expectations for all learners? Are we actively trying to close the achievement gap?

With our new English Language Arts Standards being implemented across the state next fall, we have a renewed sense of urgency to ensure that *all* students are college- and career-ready. There is no denying, as it stands right now, not all of our students are adequately prepared for post-secondary success. But we can change that.

Whatever the reason for the achievement gap, we know that the literacy demands of students in the 21st century are higher than ever before. As educators, we want to challenge our students to reach their full potential, but we also have to be willing to do what it takes in order to ensure that happens. If college- and career-ready for all really means *all*, then we have to do a better job of using our expertise as reading educators to ensure our students have rich learning experiences that engage them in meaningful reading and writing experiences throughout the entire school day. That is easier said than done, I know. It would be so much easier if there was a silver bullet or one right answer to achieving that goal. But it is not possible to have a silver bullet that will meet the needs of every student. Students come with a range of readiness and achievement profiles and school

staff must have a full toolkit of instructional practices and supports to meet the needs of all learners. This includes, in part, moving beyond our comfort zones, using multiple forms of text, engaging learners more actively, scaffolding instruction intentionally, and focusing on student strengths rather than weaknesses.



Reading proficiency develops over time, and students of all abilities need sustained and intentional reading instruction throughout their K-12 schooling in order to be ready for the demands of college and the workplace. Students reading at or above grade level also benefit from explicit reading instruction to encourage ongoing growth and development of critical thinking skills while some students will require intervention, additional support, and instruction on reading skills and strategies to successfully master grade-level expectations. Otherwise, we have no hope of closing the gap. Continuing to do business the same old way will continue to yield the same results. Why would we expect anything else?

In Minnesota, we are actively working to close the achievement

gap through a collaborative effort between the Minnesota Reading Association (MRA) and the Minnesota Department of Education (MDE).



Kari Ross

From the capitol to the classroom, we are aligning our practices and putting systems in place to ensure that all students have the knowledge and skills to be successful in the 21st century. Minnesota will be one of the first states to fully implement the Common Core State Standards next fall, and we also recently adopted the WIDA standards to support academic language development and academic achievement for linguistically diverse students. We've collaborated on model examples of standards-based Individual Education Plans for students with disabilities that go beyond fluency or basic rote skills, and we've created a birth through grade twelve Blueprint for Literacy. MRA and MDE regularly provide joint professional development for teachers.

Changing student outcomes begins with changing how we provide educational experiences to be most meaningful to the students we serve. We have a sense of urgency that *now* is the time to change our practices and systems as we are determined to ensure that *all* students are college- and career-ready. Through a cohesive, comprehensive, and collaborative approach, I am confident we will do it. It won't be easy, but with partnerships and collective understanding, we can move into a new realm of possibilities.

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## Points to Ponder

"Above all else, put the kids first and love them."

"Where is the common sense in the Common Core?"

"Recognize your balcony people."

"Increase writing time."

"Increase read-aloud time."

"Be wary of technology use."

Some interesting things to consider!

I just returned from the 57th IRA Annual Convention, held in Chicago, IL. This year marks the eighth time I have been able to participate in what I believe is truly the best professional learning opportunity available for educators. I also realize that the cost of registration, airfare, hotel, and substitutes for missed days of school prevents many classroom teachers from attending. I am hopeful that the words I am about to share convince the "powers that be," those responsible for determining how to best use staff development funding, that allowing teachers to attend the IRA Convention is one of the wisest decisions they will ever make.

I commend my district, Albert Lea Schools, for making a huge investment in teacher and student learning by sending 12 teachers to this year's IRA Convention, which focused on "Celebrating Teaching." Plans are already underway for our "dynamic dozen" to figure out the best way to capture and build upon the learning we brought back to southern Minnesota from the Windy City. There is excitement but more importantly, determination, to effect positive change in our schools. The "dynamic dozen" were given no strict mandates about what to do upon returning from the convention, other than

to share what we have learned with our colleagues. There was no requirement to put in extra hours or make drastic changes to our instruction. Despite that, we have a meeting scheduled less than a week after our return so we can create an action plan for harnessing the new knowledge, insights, resources and strategies we gained while at the IRA Convention. It is a privilege to work with such dedicated people who understand that effective

Returning to those points to ponder... All of these messages came from the presenters and authors I listened to at the IRA Convention in Chicago. Who said them and what do they mean to me?

**"Above all else, put the kids first and love them."** Dr. Steven Perry, author of the book *Push Has Come to Shove: getting our kids the education they deserve*, shares his belief that we need to start making important decisions in our school

### IRA 57<sup>TH</sup> ANNUAL CONVENTION



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APRIL 29-MAY 2, 2012

Expand your knowledge. Broaden your community. Spark your inspiration.

change aimed at improving student learning must begin with quality instruction. Exceptional teachers are what matter most. How fortunate the "dynamic dozen" is to have been a part of a professional learning opportunity that packs such a powerful punch into just a few days.

I have heard several teachers from the group describe the experience as "life-changing," which echoes my sentiments from the first IRA Convention I attended in Reno, NV in 2004. The path I ventured onto since that time has resulted in rewarding leadership roles with both the Minnesota Reading Association and the International Reading Association. I have collaborated with teachers from across the country and was inspired to become a National Board Certified Teacher. Life-long friendships have formed and, most importantly, I am continually learning how to be a better teacher.

that are great for kids, not just adults. When asked about the success of his school, Capital Prep Magnet school in Hartford, Connecticut, Dr. Perry shared: "We are a family, and we love our kids consistently. This means that we want them to know right from wrong and that we treat them fairly. Our kids know that our teachers go to bat for them every day, even when it seems like they're working against them." **2012**

#### Opening Keynote Address

**"Where is the common sense in the Common Core?"** Jan Miller Burkins advises educators to use caution when implementing the Common Core standards. In her blog, Burkins suggests that if it sounds crazy, it probably is. Her list of the top ten crazy things people are saying about Common Core State Standards includes some surprising gems such as "All of our elementary instruction is changing to whole group lessons." "Ninety

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## What We Can Learn from Video Games

Though his book is not new, I recently picked up James Paul Gee's *What Video Games Can Teach Us About Literacy and Learning*. Of course, the title itself is provocative. How can anything so violent, so addictive, so contrary to the very nature of our classrooms, teach us anything about how to education?

Yet after the initial reaction, the idea seems to make sense. Gee both critiques our current practices and approaches in schools and offers a rather thought-provoking approach to building learning environments. Now Gee certainly doesn't suggest that all games are of equal value, but he does not—on the face of it—discard all games, or even most games, including some first-person shooter games. He suggests that there are valuable lessons to be learned not only in the design of the games, but also in their potential as cultural artifacts.

Looking at how players learn and navigate through games, as well as how they persevere and interact with those environments, provides us some valuable information about how to help students be successful in schools. Imagine for a moment all of the qualities needed to be good at a given video game. Players need to be persistent, they need to be flexible, and they need to be committed. Gee argues that those are exactly the same qualities needed to be good at school. Unfortunately, we don't always structure or design schools to foster these traits, and therein lies the biggest difference between schools and video games.

Designers of video games know that they have to offer a game that ultimately attracts lots of players. They design games around engaging narratives. They build games where early stages of the game include little risk, and easy rewards. Then as the



game progresses, the tasks become more difficult. The game can also adapt to the unique needs of the player so that players who get stuck on any given section can receive additional clues or help. Players also learn that they can work together to overcome their challenges. A wealth of online gaming sites afford young players the chance to share their knowledge. Designers also know



that the rewards for success have to be meaningful. If the tasks are too simple and the rewards too frequent, players often lose interest, while tasks that are too tough generally discourage players from continuing.

Beyond this, Gee suggests that the games themselves, like a book or movie, should be critiqued for their messages. What are the hidden (and perhaps not so hidden) messages of these games? He also suggests that in some of the more recent games, players have the chance to take up multiple identities in a game, at one point playing the part of the hero and at others the villain. And in doing so, players soon learn that those labels themselves are both incomplete and unfair.

In contrast to this, Gee argues that much of school is de-contextualized information that rewards a small percentage of students, students who are especially good at playing the game of school, which involves quite a bit of memorizing and drilling, and little in the way of critical thinking and inquiry. As Gee writes, "Learners cannot do much with lots of overt information that a teacher has explicitly told them outside the context of immersion in actual practice."

The idea that I might be able to engage my students in their education to the same degree that their games do is powerful. Applying these principles of game design means that we will need to be better about creating learning experiences that provide context, encourage inquiry, and offer interaction.

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I have always believed that great literature, whether intended for adults or children, has the potential to change lives. This past month I have had the honor of witnessing that kind of power as a story unfolded right in my classroom. The story was inspired by another story that came from a lovely picture book, *The Lemonade Club*, written by my favorite author, Patricia Polacco.

A few weeks ago I learned about a special little boy, JL, who at just six years of age was facing a very scary, horrible medical condition involving a brain tumor. Like hundreds of others in our community, I wanted to support this brave young boy. CJ, a colleague's son, was busy making and selling braided "JL bracelets" for his buddy. Several thousand bracelets have been sold in the past month. I eagerly ordered 20 of them for my class.

I decided to approach the tough subject of serious illness with my first graders by reading them *The Lemonade Club*. This poignant story is based on Polacco's daughter, Traci, and how, as a fifth grader, she supported her best friend and her favorite teacher who were both dealing with cancer. The three became known as the "Lemonade Club," whose motto was always "When life hands you lemons, make lemonade." After sharing Polacco's uplifting tale of courage and friendship, I told my students about JL, along with the inspiring story of CJ and his bracelet project. Proving that the best and most memorable teaching moments come straight from the kids, one of my neediest students literally jumped out of his seat and suggested that we hold a "lemonade stand" at our school to make more money to help JL and his family.

The class erupted with cheers of enthusiasm for this idea.

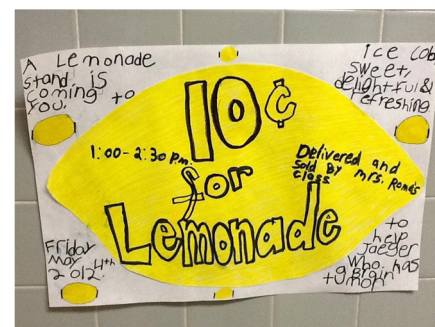
I had to quickly and gently explain that this was a big idea and that as much as I loved it, we would need to talk to the principal to see if it would be okay to do. My little project coordinator (an EBD student who lost his mother one year ago) volunteered to present his idea to the principal. I chose



another student to accompany him and a third student to videotape the meeting with my iPad™. Next I explained that when you want to meet with someone about an important idea, it is a good idea to schedule an appointment so we called the secretary and set up the meeting. The principal had no idea why this trio needed to see her on such short notice, nor did she know she would be videotaped. In preparation for the meeting, I asked my class to think about the kinds of questions we would need to be able to answer if we were going to convince her that the Lemonade Stand project was worthy of her support. We talked about

the details that would answer the "what, where, why, when, and how" questions for a few minutes before sending our class representatives down the hall.

Just five minutes later they returned with huge smiles and even more enthusiasm... the principal said "YES!" and they had the video to prove it. The show of support from our school leader couldn't have been scripted any better than the beautiful way she reacted to the proposal put before her. With this important endorsement taken care of, the kids sprang into action with the most important "authentic writing" project ever. The project coordinator who typically scoffed at any writing work spent the next hour making one of many beautiful posters to advertise the lemonade stand. We made sure each poster addressed all the essential details surrounding the project. I typed up a letter to parents explaining the project and asking for their support. Within days, half of the parents had responded, offering to donate cups, lemonade, bags of ice, and volunteer time on the day of the big event, May 4, 2012.



Students chose and signed up for jobs, as lemonade makers or servers, money collectors, photographers, and clean-up crew. We also created a flyer to send home with the nearly 400 students at our school, asking them to bring a dime to buy a glass of "ice-

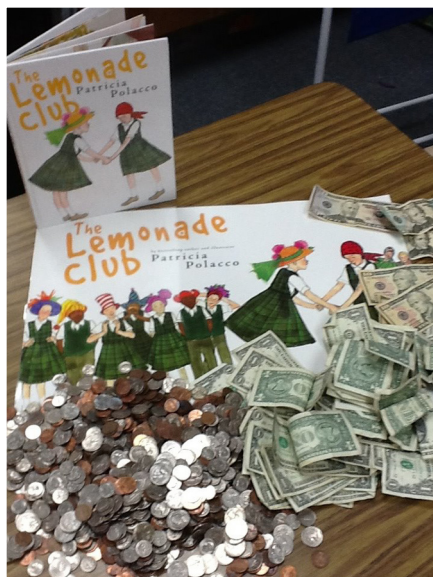
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## The Lemonade Club (cont'd)

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cold, refreshing, sweet, and delightful lemonade." Students in other classes started bringing their coins to school several days ahead of time. A buzz was building... everyone was eager to show their support for a little boy who was facing an increasingly tough time.

As I added up the dimes in my head I realized that our efforts might bring in just \$40, and that was based on every single student and adult in the school contributing the asking price of ten cents per glass of lemonade. I hoped the students wouldn't be too disappointed. A week before the big day, a wonderful paraprofessional stopped by our classroom to tell me she would be gone on the day of the Lemonade Stand but she wanted to make a donation so she handed me a one dollar bill. The very next day, our project coordinator brought in a huge container filled with all sorts



of change and announced he was donating all of it to JL. This little guy (as mentioned earlier, a very needy EBD student) was a pro at avoiding



academic tasks. However, that morning he set out to do some serious money counting. With a week to go before the big day, we already had more than \$25 in our money jar.

On the morning of the Lemonade Stand, eager customers were stopping by to ask about when the Lemonade Stand would be visiting their area of the school. Kindergarten playground supervisors dropped off enough money to buy a glass of lemonade for every student in their charge. Several teachers reported receiving donations from parents that would cover their entire class. The excitement in Room 135 was nearing fever pitch. I heard one optimistic little girl proclaim "this is going to be the best day ever." After we made our lemon yellow "lemon headbands" groups of students assisted me with the making of more than 25 gallons of lemonade. At 1:00 our show hit the road with the help of some great

volunteers and it was a non-stop lemonade frenzy for the next two hours. We paused for a few minutes to be interviewed by the local TV station. We served every student and just about every adult in the building. Some of our customers (more supportive parents) even took time away from work to stop in and show their support. Nearly every customer paid more than our asking price of ten cents per glass. Our school custodian left us speechless when he paid \$50 for his glass. When the last glasses of lemonade were served to the thirsty Lemonade Stand workers, we raised our glasses in a toast to honor our friend JL. We had collected an impressive \$346. What a memorable lesson my incredible students learned and taught others... in the words of Patricia Polacco, "When life hands you lemons, make lemonade."

**Maurna Rome, Albert Lea Schools**



## Academic Language: Beginning the conversation

According to Wolf (2012), by the time they reach kindergarten, children from privileged homes have heard 132,000,000 more words than children from impoverished homes (See also, Hart & Risley, 1999). Not only have they heard and applied a larger vocabulary, the daily talking, thinking, reasoning, language structure and so forth in homes with educated, professional adults saturates children in the discourse patterns of academic language. In broad, sweeping terms, academic language is the language of school. Unlike casual conversation, academic language exudes a distant, authoritative persona, characterized by technical words and a succinct style (Nagy, & Townsend, 2012; Schleppegrell, 2009; Schleppegrell & O'Hallaron, 2011; Snow & Uccelli, 2009; Zwiers, 2007). More specifically, academic language encompasses the technical vocabulary used within specific subjects as well as the general vocabulary common across all academic disciplines; it is the various genres for speaking and writing that are accepted in academic and professional venues; it is the way a writer/speaker structures and contextualizes information; it is the way a reader/listener comprehends and organizes information so that it can be retained and recalled; finally, and most importantly, it is a way of thinking (Bunch, 2011; Duff, 2010; Foorman, 2011; Nagy & Townsend, 2012; National Research Council, 2010).

Academic language seems to have risen quickly to the forefront of K-12 instruction, possibly because of its prominent role in Teacher Performance Assessment (TPA). This proposed assessment is still being refined and tested; it is not yet an initial licensure requirement

in Minnesota, but is proposed to be in the near future. However, student teachers in Minnesota are required to complete a TPA as part of the field testing of TPA. In short, to complete a TPA, a student teacher videotapes part of a 3-5 day learning segment from one class and extensively analyzes all aspects of his/her teaching of that learning segment: the school setting; the students' background knowledge; the planning; the instruction; the students' work samples; and the assessment. Calibrated and trained evaluators analyze and score each individual student teacher's TPA through rubrics, leveled 1-5. Of the 12 rubrics, 3 assess the ability to incorporate academic language into the documented learning segment (TPA Handbook, 2011).

The purpose of this brief article is to define five of the salient features of academic language, rather than develop a rich definition of its nuances. This article attempts to begin the conversation among K-12 teachers and teacher educators, specifically language teachers, as we grapple with an understanding of academic language and its implementation. During the 2012-2013 academic year, the Minnesota Academy of Reading, the Minnesota Reading Association, and other literacy organizations plan on hosting seminars, symposiums, and so forth to continue the conversation on academic language in K-12 schools and its impact on student achievement.

### Vocabulary

In regard to academic language, vocabulary divides into three tiers (Beck, McKown, & Kucan, 2008). Tier I are common words such as

use, for, shoe, she, yes, quickly, cold, the, and so forth, which most children acquire in daily conversations in their first language. Tier III words are content specific technical words, which may be commonly used or rarely used. Examples include frieze, poem, microscope, market share, triangle, melody, and so forth. Tier III words often are called the bricks of academic language, and Tier II words are called the mortar.

**Tier I Words**  
 use for THE yes  
 shoe quickly  
 cold SHE

Tier II words are more difficult to pinpoint, since they tend to operate under two slightly different paradigms. Classifying words as Tier I, II, and III is credited to Beck, McKeown, and Osmanon (1987). They define Tier II words as "the words that define written text—but are not so common in everyday conversation" (Beck, et al., 2008, p. 7). Tier II words appear more frequently in written language than in everyday conversations. Furthermore, Tier II words are more sophisticated and precise; they pull the majority of their examples from the well-written children's literature which is often taught in school.

When others discuss the vocabulary of academic language, they do not use the term Tier II words, but rather the term general academic vocabulary and refer to the words from the Academic Word List

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## Academic Language (cont'd)

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(AWL). Those using the AWL for the vocabulary of academic language draw their examples primarily from academic texts (science, math, social studies) taught in school, rather than literary texts taught in school. Coxhead (2000), who created the Academic Word List, consulted texts written in 28 subjects (including science, math, arts, law and others), for words frequently used across all academic disciplines, but infrequently used in conversation. Examples include words like analyze, assess, consist, data, evident, indicate, interpret, occur, percent, principle, simulate, theory, vary, and so forth (Burke, 2004; Coxhead; Nagy & Townsend, 2012). "These words have strong overlap with our Tier II words. And, of course, for the same reason: Tier Two represents our effort to identify highly useful, though not necessarily high frequency words" (Beck, et al., 2008, p. 14).

### Tier II Words

analyze  
simulate  
VARY  
ASSESS  
DATA  
evident  
consist  
INTERPRET  
PERCENT

Both groups agree, however, that Tier II words and/or general academic vocabulary should be taught more frequently than Tier III words (technical, content specific words) because students are less likely to encounter them in daily conversation but need them when reading. Furthermore, although both the Tier II and Tier III words should be taught, teaching more

Tier II words than Tier III words has a greater impact on students' success (Beck, et al., 2008; Nagy & Townsend, 2012).

### Discourse Markers

Some Tier I and Tier II words that exist in most students' working vocabulary, can also act as discourse markers (Schleppegrell, 2009; Snow & Uccelli, 2009). Discourse markers are linguistic road signs that signal the reader to the chain of ideas in a given text, whether it is a paragraph or a dissertation. Transitions are a subset of discourse markers. Skilled readers know that transitions such as "in summary," "for example," "along these lines," and so forth, are signs to tell the reader where the given text is headed and to make explicit connections for a reader so s/he does not get lost in deciphering a text's message (National Research Council, 2010; Kendeou, Savage, & van den Broek, 2009). Phrases such as "first," "second," "third" and others organize information and create cohesive ties for the reader to be able to hold the meaning of a text together and to see the relationship among the ideas. Chapter titles, headings, and subheadings also act as connectors, so readers can categorize/remember and/or find information as they read and re-read. Again, these connectors occur much more frequently in academic contexts; in informal writing and casual conversations, connectors may include transitions such as "yeah," "kinda like," "okay," "so," etc., which connect a few ideas. These informal transitions cannot sustain larger ideas or the relationship among ideas necessary for technical, academic, and/or

long texts (Snow & Uccelli, 2009; Zwiers, 2007).

### Organization

In Aristotle's *Rhetorica*, he establishes an organizational structure for speaking, which we Westerners have adopted not only for speaking, but also for writing and thinking. Organizing information is one of the ways people make meaning from information gathered or given. For example, in English, on graphic organizers, spreadsheets, lab reports and so forth, information is organized from left to right. In addition, in Western academia, information is

### Tier III Words

melody  
POEM  
market share  
frieze  
calumny  
MICROSCOPE  
triangle

organized from broad to specific, by chronology or sequence; by main idea followed by subordinate points; by categories; by location/spatial, or, as explained in the section about discourse markers, by superimposing categories and structure on information to better understand or make sense of it. Organization is not limited to how a writer expresses ideas: rather it includes how a reader comprehends information, and how a thinker structures ideas, questions, and solutions.

### Genre Structure

Along with organization, Aristotle also established Western categories of discourse: expressive, persuasive,

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## Academic Language (cont'd)

and informative (Kinnevey, 1971); the bulk of academic discourse falls into the latter category. Although the purpose of a text may require a specific genre, genre refers more to the type or form of a given text as a way of classifying and understanding it. However, genre can be confusing because the term encompasses text at different levels of specificity. For example, a poem is a genre, but a sonnet is also a genre, and a Shakespearean sonnet is also considered a genre. Genres, such as a lab report or a five-paragraph essay, fall within a given discourse—expressive, persuasive, or informative—determined by their purpose. The features of a text—words, voice, sentence structure, form, organization and so forth—are the best indicators of genre. To a degree, the purpose of a given text drives whether it is expressive, persuasive, or informative and the genre determines how the message is communicated. When teachers, students, readers, and writers analyze the rhetorical context (audience, purpose, writer) and the genre before they approach or create a text, it is easier to understand and/or to produce.

### Lexical density

In short, lexical density is characterized by economy of words, but complexity of ideas (Nagy & Townsend, 2012; Schleppegrell & O'Halloran, 2011; Snow & Uccelli, 2009). As compared to informal conversations, academic language has lexical density because it includes considerably more Tier II and Tier III words, more precise discourse markers and transitions, more polysyllabic words, more abstract concepts, and grammatical metaphor (Snow & Uccelli, 2009). Except for

grammatical metaphor, most of these elements are self-explanatory, so only grammatical metaphor will be explained here. Grammatical metaphor is modifying a word so it can be used as another part of speech. For example, scaffolding (noun) is used in construction as a support for building something, and it is slowly removed when the structure can stand independently. In education, we use the word “scaffold” as a verb to describe the slow release of student support as they are learning a skill or concept. So, using the term scaffold as a verb adds both conciseness, because it uses fewer words, and depth, because it makes an abstract concept more concrete/tangible. Grammatical metaphor spices everyday language, but dominates academic discourse (Nagy & Townsend, 2012; Schleppegrell & O'Halloran, 2011; Schleppegrell, 2009; Snow & Uccelli, 2009; Zwiers, 2007).

### Register and Code Switching

People in all cultures and languages have several registers in which they speak and write, whether the registers are conscious or subconscious. “Register refers to specific features of language that vary according to the context and purpose of a communication. Speakers of all languages and of all dialects are assumed to engage in register variation” (National Research Council, 2010, p.11). Register is determined by the context, by the role of the speaker/writer to the audience, and by the purpose; register is identified by the speaker/writer's tone, word choice, dialect, technical information, and so forth. The vocabulary, structure, and stance used in a lecture differ

from the vocabulary, structure, and stance used when chatting with a neighbor. Code switching is the ability to fluently switch registers, depending upon the context.

### Conclusion

Academic language is not a concrete object or idea that a teacher can give a student. Academic language is like giving students drawing. It's not a static thing you can give them because it is organic and a way of thinking and imaging and understanding all of which occur simultaneously. When students draw, they do not begin with color, then add balance, then perspective, and so forth. They must internalize/digest these elements in order to use them simultaneously when they draw. Academic language is the same. If we are to apply academic language in a way to impact student achievement, students and teachers must internalize it, so it becomes a part of how meaning is formed.

And to quote Hamlet, “Aye, there's the rub.” How do we internalize academic language for ourselves and for our students? What does it look like in the classroom? The purpose of this short article is to begin a conversation about academic language among veteran and novice K-12 teachers and teacher educators. In the future, the leaders in Minnesota's professional literacy organizations such as the Minnesota Reading Association and the Minnesota Academy of Reading are planning workshops, seminars, and other opportunities for extended conversations around academic language so that teachers can internalize academic language and apply it in the classroom. As teachers, we cannot change the fact that some

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## Academic Language (cont'd)

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children will come to school having heard 132,000,000 more words than some of their peers. But we can use academic language to narrow the gap.

*Note: This article is extracted from a larger article on academic language which has been submitted for publication.*

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## Points (cont'd)

percent of the reading in elementary schools needs to be at frustration level." "We have to teach students not to make personal connections to texts." **Common Core**

### "Recognize your balcony people."

Steven Layne reminds us that we all have special people in our lives, people who truly make a difference. These people are our "balcony people." As teachers, we have an opportunity to become balcony people to our students. Steven's personal story of recovery from Guillain-Barre syndrome is as inspiring as his amazing book, *Igniting a Passion for Reading*. **Layne Blog**

### "Increase writing time."

Linda Hoyt stresses the importance of "power write," spending five minutes for writing during every segment of the school day (during each and every academic subject). This type of writing includes letters, lists, descriptions, poems, summaries, and responses to reading. "Power write" supports three important writing purposes: writing to remember, writing to think, and writing to understand. **Nonfiction writing strategies**

### "Increase read-aloud time."

Mary Bigler insists that one of the best things we can do to encourage kids

to do more reading is to read aloud to them! She suggests introducing books that will tickle their funny bones, light up their eyes, or touch their hearts. Reading aloud daily from joke books, poetry, picture books, and nonfiction books is a must! **Mary Bigler's Website**

"Be wary about technology use." Mem Fox believes iPad apps should not be educational. She thinks they should be fun and do not need to teach anything. "My books are there for one purpose only, to be read and then read and read again. All the education you want to come from that book is through the reading of it. If people are going to play with words that I have sweated over—a picture is only a page-and-a-half of writing that takes three years to write—and not go back to the book that I have written, then I will be blood red with rage."

Mem goes on to say, "It is the soothing words of the book that brings children into literacy. There is enough of that fast stuff out there. Books for children are unique and cannot be replaced." **Mem Fox article**

Maurna Rome, Albert Lea Schools

## Sharing (cont'd)

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out of books every once in a while. "Sometimes you'll go to one library and it'll be empty, and usually within a day or two it fills back up again," said Brooks. "The secret is to get lots of people involved, and not get their reject books, but their favorite books when they're done with them."

# little free library

Ranging from Boy Scouts to retired teachers, a wide variety of people have become stewards of the libraries. Most of them aren't of college age though. Bol and Brooks agree, however, that universities are a great platform for getting people involved, whether they are in college or part of the outer community.

"University students, even though they're busy reading books and busy doing schoolwork, they still are a group of people that are naturally attracted to new ideas and expanding their minds," said Bol.

Not even University of Minnesota students are exempt from the basic principles of Little Free Library, which Brooks summed up: "We all need each other. We need a sense of community. We miss having people around us who care about us, and this strategy of having a little box of books can help other people, as well as us." After all, if UW-Madison can do it, why can't we?

Alyssa Bluhm. Originally printed on March 5, 2012, in the *Wake Student Magazine*.

## Summer Opportunity

### 22nd Annual Summer Literacy Institute, K-6

Hamline University, Sundin Music Hall  
July 16 - 19, 2012, 8:30 a.m. - 3:15 p.m.

Learn with your literacy peers and some of the finest educators in the country. This year's institute will feature national literacy experts Sharon Taberski, Greg Tang, Katie Wood Ray, and Lester Laminack.

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The 4-day institute offers a conference rate option (for those not needing academic credit) of just \$400 if registered by June 1st for early-bird savings or \$450 if registered after June 1st.

For more information, go to [www.hamline.edu/literacy](http://www.hamline.edu/literacy)